

**LSE-UC Berkeley**

**Banladesh**

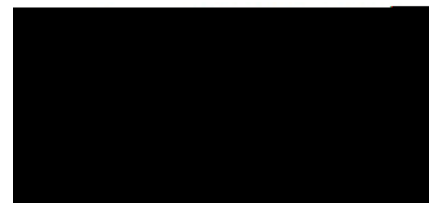
**Summit**

**February 2019**

**The Entrepreneurship**

**Model and Women's**

**Empowerment**



South Asia Centre  
LSE

Subir & Malini Chowdhury Centn

Established in June 2015, the South Asia Centre harnesses LSE's research & academic focus on South Asia, whose particularities constantly challenge conventional thinking in the social sciences.



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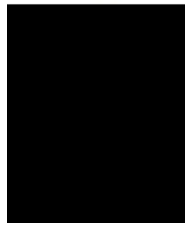
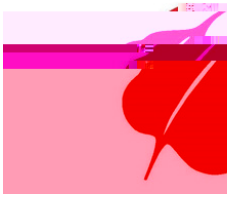
Panelists

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How the work gets done: a BRAC perspective on microfinance

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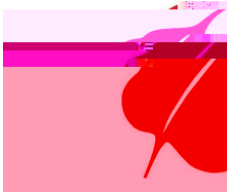


## Panellists

- Juli Huang, Lecturer in Anthropology of Development, University of Edinburgh
- Shameran Abed, Senior Director of Microfinance and Targeting the Ultra Poor Programs, BRAC
- Lamia Karim, Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Oregon

### Moderator:

- David Lewis, Professor of Social Policy and Development, London School of Economics and Political Science



## Entrepreneurship: empowering or exploiting existing vulnerabilities?



L-R: Lamia Karim, Juli Huang, Shameran Abed and David Lewis (Moderator)

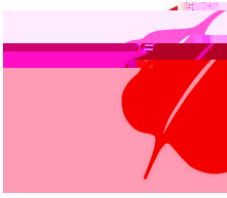
There are polarizing viewpoints on entrepreneurship, which has been a popular strategy for poverty alleviation and increasing women's empowerment. Entrepreneurship programs are diverse and may be backed by the private, NGO and public sectors. However, some argue that such programs actually serve to exploit existing vulnerabilities. Entrepreneurship itself takes many different forms, even if the activities appear quite similar, and the materialization of empowerment is often misrecognized.

Drawing from the results of 15 months of continuous ethnographic fieldwork on women entrepreneurs in northwest Bangladesh, Juli Huang presents a nuanced view of women's entrepreneurship programs and the resulting empowerment or exploitation of women in poverty. The speaker argues that entrepreneurship programs which convert social assets into organizational profits, while ignoring the production of social value, are not empowering.

Entrepreneurship can be viewed  
as a form of poverty capital. (E. J. Co)







She paid for educational costs, and became a main earner in her family. This all earned her power and leverage within her family. In the fourth example, a woman was salaried by BRAC to provide health services and sell health products in her community. As a health provider, she provided a valuable service to her community, and she did not need to push sales because of her salaried status.

In conclusion, programs which merely convert social assets into profits are not empowering to women. The production of social value is an important component of empowerment in entrepreneurship, and non-entrepreneurial features (e.g., training grants, salaries) may lead to the most empowerment potential for women.

BRAC has years of experience with poverty alleviation in Bangladesh, and as Shameran Abed explained, one of their major learnings is that poverty alleviation requires holistic solutions. Microfinance has historically been about giving basic credit and savings services to poor women, and programs in Bangladesh are unique because unlike elsewhere they are delivered wholly by not for profit organizations.

For example, the dominant way to do group-based microfinance elsewhere is joint liability, where other women in the group pay if one woman fails to pay. This joint liability system no longer is implemented in Bangladesh. ~~10/16~~

Over time, BRAC has observed an increase in assets and in decision making among their microfinance clients, outcomes that one typically thinks of with these types of programs. However, a lot of their work now with adolescent girls and ultra poor women has become as much about confidence building as the economic elements. Programs aim to increase confidence, self-worth, and hope. There is also a need to rethink how best to empower people.

For example, one BRAC microfinance client, a woman, purchased a refrigerator. Having this appliance

She entered another marriage, but her second husband became abusive as well. Eventually, the woman became ill and died.

When her body was returned to her home village, the community was suspicious of her body, and it was not initially accepted back into the village for burial. Throughout her difficult adult life, she was stuck in a larger system of external forces that led to her death.

The players in this system include the multinational garment companies that enable factory conditions, the Bangladeshi government that fails to regulate these factories, and the consumers of fast fashion that create the demand for this system.

In conclusion, wage labor opportunities do not necessarily lead to empowerment. In fact, rather than empowering women, this system can trap them between the patriarchies of home and global capital.



## Discussion

### On the use of technology

A lot of the microfinance work in Bangladesh is about the relationship between staff and clients. There is interest in the use of mobile payments and credit algorithms, but it needs to be done in a careful way.

Using technology for these programs should not put vulnerable, ultra poor women into more indebtedness. Additionally, there are concerns about the potential for state surveillance through the use of technology.

For example, one advantage of factory garment workers over individual entrepreneurs is that they can collectively organize and engage in direct action politics. However, technologies (e.g., CCTV) that have been implemented at the factory level now allow identification of so-called disruptive workers. These workers can be fired and then blacklisted at other factories.

